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ABSTRACT

As the population of older Americans continues to increase, more and more elderly persons will seek diverse living arrangements. Residential facilities must be designed to meet their needs. Person-environment congruence may be an important determinant of residential satisfaction and relocation stress for the elderly. Residents (N=107) of eight homes for the aged completed the Environmental Preferences Questionnaire which assesses preferences along the dimensions of territoriality, isolation, stimulation, and order/organization. Environmental press was determined for each dimension in addition to morale, residential satisfaction, and desire to stay. Oversupply conditions of territory, isolation, stimulation in the immediate environment, and order resulted in optimal satisfaction. Congruence per se did not appear to be better than incongruence for well-being on all dimensions. In most cases, a moderate or extreme oversupply of environmental press relative to needs produced greater well-being. Results suggest that by providing maximum opportunities for all forms of privacy in the overall environment, and maximum stimulation and order in individual rooms, residential facilities may more successfully meet the needs of the elderly. (Author/NRB)

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PERSON-ENVIRONMENT CONGRUENCE IN RESIDENCES FOR THE ELDERLY

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Person-Environment Congruence in Residences for the Elderly *

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As the population of persons over the age of sixty-five continues to increase in the United States, more and more elderly individuals will seek diverse living arrangements. One of the residential settings most frequently selected by the elderly is the congregate facility which provides various levels of care, from apartment, to home for the ages, to nursing homes. It is critical to design this type of facility in ways which fulfill the older person's needs.

Person-environment congruence or fit may be an important determinant of residential satisfaction and relocation stress for elderly in these situations.

It is important to consider congruence in such institutions because the residential environment is more pervasive than that of other "primary environments" (Stokols, 1972) for this age group. There are two reasons for this increasing salience. First, institutionalization often implies a total environment where the individual must barter away many aspects of privacy (e.g., physical privacy, self-disclosure and opportunities for solitude) in return for personal care and need satisfaction (Pastalan, 1968). Second, the elderly person's ability to shape his environment has declined. This combination of decreased ability to cope with the environment and a suddenly increased incongruence of individual needs and environmental features places adaptive demands upon the individual.

According to theories of person-environment congruence proposed by

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Lawton & Nahemow (1973), Kahana (1973), Holland (1961), and Stern (1965), the individual experiences optimal well-being when his needs are in equilibrium with environment characteristics or opportunities for satisfying these needs. To the extent that individual needs are not satisfied because of existing environmental characteristics and environmental "press," the individual will experience frustration and strain. Through a better understanding of person-environment fit, administrators and designers of homes for the aged may reassess their institutions and allow for greater flexibility in design along those dimensions which have been empirically shown to produce the greatest stress when incongruent with some appreciable proportion of the resident's needs.

The research described here was an attempt to measure "person-environment fit" using an adaptation of the multitrait-multimethod approach (Campbell and Fiske, 1959). A number of methods were employed to assess needs and preferences of the individual and to quantify characteristics of the environment. Indices of fit along four parallel dimensions of the individual and the environment were constructed. The major hypothesis tested was that congruence is a better predictor of residential satisfaction, morale and desire to stay than is an undersupply of environmental press or an oversupply. This should be particularly true in the areas of territoriality, isolation, stimulation and order/organization, the four dimensions examined in this study.

METHOD

Subjects. 107 residents of eight homes for the aged in Detroit, Cleveland, and Toledo participated in the study. Length of institutionalization ranged from three to 32 months, with a modal period of 22 months. All subjects had

resided in their own homes prior to the move. 46.8% had lived in those settings longer than five years, and 61.7% had lived alone or with a spouse, suggesting high residential stability and minimal experience with congregate living among these subjects. Variability in education, occupation and religion was considerable, with the latter reflecting differences in sponsorship of the institutions. The eight homes also varied in size (100-450 residents), location (rural vs. suburban vs. urban), ownership (proprietary vs. religious vs. secular organization).

Variables and their Measurement. In order to assess the individual and the environment along commensurate dimensions, it was necessary to select dimensions which could reasonably be expected to describe both needs and press. From an analysis of existing scales of environmental preference (Marshall, 1972; Stern, 1970; Kahana, 1975), three areas were selected: Stimulation/Activity, Order/Organization, and Privacy. Subsequent pretesting and factor analyses of the items comprising these dimensions resulted in 5 dimensions, four of which were selected for this study (Kiyak, 1977, 1979). The final version of the Environmental Preferences Questionnaire (EPQ) consisted of 26 items assessing preferences along these four dimensions. A four-point response scale accompanied each item.

Measures of the environment were developed to be consistent with items describing individual preferences along the four dimensions. Thus, environmental press was determined for each dimension using a self-reported description of one's immediate and distal environment, and a rating scale used by objective observers to assess both types of environment. Each environmental

scale consisted of four-point responses.

Dependent variables included morale, residential satisfaction and desire to stay. Morale was assessed by the PGC Morale Scale (Lawton, 1969, 1975). The other two were comprised of 5-item questionnaires with 4-point response scales.

Procedure. Face-to-face interviews were conducted by trained interviewers with each elderly resident who fit study criteria. Each session took 20-45 minutes.

Research assistants trained in environmental assessment techniques conducted time-sampling observations of designated public rooms in each home (distal environment) as well as assessing each respondent's room (immediate environment). The environmental observations were conducted at the same time as the interviews, to reduce the effect of history and maturation.

RESULTS

Oneway analyses of variance were conducted on person and environment variables separately, and on congruence, a new variable created by the combination of the two. In order to perform these analyses, however, the continuous data comprising these variables had to be collapsed into discrete categories. A frequency distribution of each person and environment measure aided in a meaningful trichotomization of the data, with approximately equal numbers of subjects in each of the three cells: high, medium and low preference; high, medium or low press in environment. Congruence was created from the resulting 3 x 3 matrix. The diagonal cells represent congruence, the four adjacent cells indicate one degree of undersupply and oversupply, while those two most distant

from the diagonal depict extreme incongruence.

Congruence produced relatively high scores on all measures of well-being for Territoriality. However, subjects in Cell 7 (extreme oversupply of territory) were significantly more satisfied, expressed higher morale and greater desire to stay than subjects in other cells (all t-tests significant at $p < .01$).

Overall F-tests on the dimension of Isolation are significant for all but one environment measure (room ratings). Optimum well-being occurred with an oversupply of isolation. As with territoriality, an undersupply of isolation relative to one's needs was most detrimental.

An interesting pattern of results emerged on Stimulation/Activity. Few overall F-tests were significant, but planned comparisons revealed optimum well-being when the distal environment provided less stimulation than the individual preferred, and the immediate environment provided excess stimulation.

Turning now to congruence along the dimension of Order/Organization, optimum satisfaction occurred under congruence and under conditions of oversupply of order. Too little orderliness or organization in the aged respondent's immediate environment created low morale and dissatisfaction. Lack of Order in the larger environment had no significant effects.

DISCUSSION

Despite the advantages of the congruence model, congruence per se does not appear to be better for well-being than incongruence on all dimensions. In most cases, a moderate or even extreme oversupply of environmental press relative to needs produces greater well-being. This is a contribution to the theoretical literature on congruence, which assumes a curvilinear relationship

between congruence and well-being. This is also a valuable finding for designers and administrators of facilities for the elderly. By providing maximum opportunities for all forms of privacy in the overall environment, and maximum Stimulation and Order in individual rooms, one may fulfill the needs of a wide spectrum of elderly.

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